

Into the Shadows: Guerrilla Warfare and the American Struggle in the Vietnam War

One of the most intriguing events in the history of the United States was the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was a long, costly, and divisive conflict that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam and its ally, the Viet Cong, against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. The conflict was part of a larger regional conflict that occurred during the later half of the 20th century called the Indochina wars and was intensified by the ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Vietnam war had a devastating impact. More than 3 million people (including over 58,000 Americans) were killed, and more than half of the dead were Vietnamese civilians.¹ One of the biggest reasons for the Vietnam War and the United States' decision to join in on the conflict was the fear of the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia. The United States government feared that if one country in Southeast Asia succumbed to communism, neighboring countries would soon follow in their footsteps. This fear of a communist expansion prompted the United States to intervene and significantly aid the South Vietnamese government in their fight against communist North Vietnam. Eventually, the US began sending over troops, drawing the US into a long and complex conflict.

Guerilla warfare in the Vietnam War forced US soldiers into intense combat, revealing the weaknesses of conventional military tactics and contributing to high casualties and psychological trauma.

First off, Guerrilla warfare, an important feature of the Vietnam War, is a combat form in which small groups of fighters use hit-and-run tactics, ambushes, and sabotage to undermine a

¹ Vietnam War: Dates and Timeline." History.com. Accessed May 16, 2025.

larger and more traditional military force. Unlike conventional battles, guerrilla fighters rely on their familiarity with the local terrain and the support of the civilian population to launch surprise attacks and quickly disappear before the enemy can retaliate.² During the Vietnam War, this was the primary combat strategy of the Vietcong, the guerilla force that fought against South Vietnam and the United States. The Vietcong's strategy was to use unconventional war tactics to counter the more technological and advanced United States military. Despite having no aircraft, tanks, or artillery, the Vietcong managed to hold out against the American troops until they left Vietnam in the 1970s by using guerilla warfare. An important factor that helped the Vietcong effectively execute their tactics was an extensive network of underground tunnels that stretched over 200 miles and could hide thousands of Vietcong soldiers.³ These tunnels allowed the Vietcong to carry out surprise attacks and then immediately vanish into the underground. Throughout the war, the tunnel systems became so crucial that the Vietcong even expanded them to include living quarters, hospitals, and command centers.

An example of the guerilla tactics used by the Vietcong was a hit and run attack where Vietcong fighters would ambush American and South Vietnamese troops, quickly attack, and then disappear into the jungle or tunnels before the enemy could retaliate.⁴ Another tactic was the use of booby traps and mines, which slowed down military operations, caused a large number of casualties among the U.S. forces, and damaged morale. In addition to surprise attacks and booby traps, the Vietcong were experts at blending into the civilian population. They often dressed as

² U.S. Department of State. "Milestones: 1961–1968 - The Vietnam War." Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/vietnam-war>. Accessed May 29, 2025.

³ BBC, "Forces and Motion - Air Resistance," BBC Bitesize, last modified March 24, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zv7bkqt/revision/4>.

⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Viet Cong (VC) | Definition, Tactics, & History." Accessed May 19, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viet-Cong>

civilians, making it extremely difficult for American and South Vietnamese soldiers to identify them and also enlisted the support of the local peasants by promising them land, wealth, and freedom under the communist government.⁵ The persistent threat of surprise attacks and booby traps had a significant impact on the mental health of American soldiers during the Vietnam War. The constant fear made it difficult for American soldiers to relax, even when they were supposed to be safe. As a result, many soldiers developed anxiety and had trouble sleeping. Over time, the daily stress caused psychological trauma and led to a decline in morale. After the war, many veterans struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a psychiatric condition caused by experiencing or witnessing traumatic events.⁶ In interviews and personal recounts from the war, Vietnam veterans have described having nightmares, flashbacks, and trouble adjusting to normal life after returning home. For example, Vietnam veteran John Ketwig recalled in his memoir, *...and a hard rain fell: A GI's True Story of the War in Vietnam*, “You never knew when the next mine would go off, or when there might be a sniper in the trees. It was exhausting, always being afraid.” Another former United States Marine said, “You never saw the enemy. You never knew where they were. They could be children, old women, or farmers by day and fighters by night. Every step you took, you wondered if you’d step on a booby trap or get ambushed from the jungle. I lost friends to sniper fire, to mines and to traps you never even saw coming. The fear never left you—even after you came home. I still have nightmares, and I jump at sudden noises. The war didn’t end for me when I left Vietnam.”⁷ These recounts from the Vietnam War show

⁵ BBC, “Forces and Motion - Air Resistance,” BBC Bitesize, last modified March 24, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zv7bkqt/revision/4>.

⁶ American Psychiatric Association, “What Is PTSD?” Psychiatry.org, accessed June 9, 2025, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>.

⁷ Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, *The Vietnam War* (PBS, 2017), episode 4, “Resolve,” <https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war/episodes/episode-four/>.

how the guerrilla tactics used in Vietnam not only caused physical harm but also left deep emotional and psychological scars on American soldiers.⁸

As the war progressed, United States commanders began to realize that traditional battlefield strategies were ineffective against Vietcong guerrilla tactics. In a 1965 letter to his wife, Lieutenant James McDonough wrote “We patrol daily, but rarely see the enemy. The jungle swallows them up. It’s like fighting ghosts.”⁹ This frustration with the war was elevated to the highest levels in the United States. In a testimony to congress, General William Westmoreland admitted, “The enemy attacks where and when he chooses, and then fades away. Our superior firepower is often useless against an enemy we cannot see.”¹⁰ As a result, the United States military often had to resort to other methods to root out the Vietcong such as using tunnel rats, large “search and destroy” missions, and chemical defoliants such as Agent Orange. However, these methods were often controversial and had unintended consequences. “Tunnel rats” were specially trained American and South Vietnamese soldiers who were sent into the extensive and dangerous tunnel networks of the Vietcong to destroy them. These were dangerous missions that exposed soldiers to cramped, pitch-black spaces filled with booby traps, enemy combatants, and the constant threat of sudden death, often resulting in severe physical and psychological stress.¹¹ American forces also used large operations called “search and destroy” missions, hoping to engage the enemy in open battle and inflict heavy casualties. The United States military used helicopters to carry out this tactic for quicker deployment of troops, access to medical

⁸ John Ketwig, *...and a hard rain fell: A GI's True Story of the War in Vietnam* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2002)

⁹ Letter from James McDonough to his wife, 1965, Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

¹⁰ William Westmoreland, testimony before the United States Congress, 1967, US Congressional Record.

¹¹ Tunnel Rats of the Vietnam War.” National Museum of the United States Army. Accessed May 21, 2025.

evacuation, and close air support. These new tactics often failed because the Vietcong avoided direct conflicts. Instead, they would strike unexpectedly and then disappear. “Search and destroy” missions sent troops into the jungle to locate and destroy Vietcong fighters and supplies. However, these missions were often frustrating for the US soldiers as the Vietcong would constantly move and hide causing some of these missions to be useless and dangerous. In addition, many innocent civilians were killed. The United States measured the success of these missions by using “body counts” (amount of Vietcong soldiers eliminated) rather than territorial or resource gain. This system led to inaccurate numbers and did not reflect accurate progress. Another way the United States attempted to counter guerrilla warfare was through the use of chemical defoliants such as Agent Orange aimed to kill the jungle cover to expose enemy positions. Consequently, this devastated the environment and had severe health effects on the people exposed to these chemicals, including both Vietnamese civilians and American soldiers. From 1962 to 1971, the United States Air Force sprayed nearly 19 million gallons of herbicides such as Agent Orange in Vietnam. The exposure to Agent Orange caused severe physical harm such as liver injury, acute pancreatitis, amenorrhea, chloracne, porphyria cutanea tarda, and wasting syndrome.¹² While the US Air Force dumped massive quantities of Agent Orange on Vietnam, hundreds of thousands of American soldiers were still fighting, leading to continuous Agent Orange exposure within the United States Military. The numerous effects of these herbicides not only resulted in physical health issues, but also caused long-term psychological trauma and mental health issues within the United States Military. Despite these efforts to combat guerrilla warfare, the Vietcong’s ability to blend in with the civilian population and disappear into the land continued to counter traditional American battlefield tactics, resulting in

¹² "Vietnam War," in *StatPearls*, StatPearls Publishing, updated August 28, 2023, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK594243/>.

many casualties throughout the years of the Vietnam war and caused frustration among American leadership and forces.

As the Vietnam War continued, nationwide protests were occurring back home in the United States. Once reports came back about the casualties and the current situation of the war, public opinion shifted dramatically. Along with the casualty count, public uncensored media coverage from Vietnam exposed the harsh realities of what was truly going on in Vietnam. Images of wounded soldiers, video footage of booby traps and mines, and photos of the effects of Agent Orange influenced public opinion regarding the war. Alongside this media, the draft, which forced thousands of young Americans into military service, was seen as unfair and was very unpopular among Americans at the time. As the war continued, US involvement in the war also increased. By 1968, over half a million American troops were in Vietnam and the war was costing \$77 billion a year¹³. The Tet Offensive of 1968 was a coordinated North Vietnamese attack on over 100 cities in South Vietnam. Although U.S. and South Vietnamese forces repelled the assaults, the scale of the offensive shocked Americans and weakened public support for the war. Despite heavy losses, North Vietnam achieved a strategic victory, marking a turning point that led to the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam.¹⁴ After the Tet Offensive, the war gradually shifted in favor of North Vietnam. Eventually, American public opinion and protests led to the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. Peace talks began in Paris, eventually resulting in the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. The agreement called for a cease-fire and the withdrawal of U.S. forces, but fighting between North and South Vietnam continued. In 1975,

¹³ BBC, "Forces and Motion - Air Resistance," BBC Bitesize, last modified March 24, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zv7bkqt/revision/4>.

¹⁴ History.com Editors, "Tet Offensive," History, last modified December 4, 2017, <https://www.history.com/articles/tet-offensive>.

North Vietnamese forces launched a final offensive, capturing Saigon and unifying Vietnam under communist control. The war officially ended with the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.¹⁵

In conclusion, the Vietnam War was an example of how unconventional battle tactics such as guerrilla warfare can challenge and frustrate the most technologically advanced military powers in the world. The Vietcong's use of sneak attacks, booby traps, mines, underground tunnels, and their ability to blend into the civilian population exposed the flaws and limitations of traditional American military strategies. This resulted in high casualties, psychological trauma, and post war impacts on soldiers. The United States efforts to counter these tactics with search and destroy missions, tunnel rats, and chemical defoliants like Agent Orange often resulted in mixed public opinion, environmental destruction, and further harm to both American soldiers and Vietnamese civilians. The constant fear and uncertainty faced by American troops in Vietnam led to widespread psychological distress and changed the way the public viewed the war over time.

The consequences of the Vietnam War reached far beyond the jungles of Southeast Asia. The conflict divided American society, sparked widespread protest, and forced the country to confront the realities of modern warfare through uncensored media coverage. The legacy of the Vietnam War, especially the lessons learned from fighting against guerrilla tactics, continues to influence American military strategy and public opinion on war to this day. In the shadows of the Vietnamese jungles, the war redefined not only military strategy, but also the very meaning of victory and loss.

¹⁵ History.com Editors, "Vietnam War," History, last modified October 29, 2009, <https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history>.

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